

Understanding and Conducting Social Network Investigations

The aim of this session is to teach investigators and lawyers how to use social networking websites. While the landscape of social networking is constantly evolving, the two most commonly known and used social networking sites are Facebook and Myspace. Therefore, this break-out session will be primarily dedicated to those sites. Those who attend will set up their own accounts on each site and get an introduction to how to investigate online.

What is social networking?

Social networking is the practice of expanding the number of one's business and/or social contacts by making connections through individuals. While social networking has gone on almost as long as societies themselves have existed, the unparalleled potential of the Internet to promote such connections is only now being fully recognized and exploited, through Web-based groups established for that purpose.

Other Social Networking Sites

Craigslist (www.craigslist.com) is a centralized network of online communities, featuring free online classified advertisements – with sections devoted to jobs, housing, personals, for sale, services, community, gigs, résumés, and discussion forums.

Friendster (www.friendster.com) allows users to contact other members, maintain those contacts, and share online content and media with those contacts. The website is also used for dating and discovering new events, bands, and hobbies. Users may share videos, photos, messages and comments with other members via their profile and their network.

YouTube (www.youtube.com) is a video sharing website on which users can upload and share videos.

Twitter (www.twitter.com) is a free social networking and micro-blogging service that enables its users to send and read messages known as *tweets*. Tweets are text-based posts of up to 140 characters displayed on the author's profile page and delivered to the author's subscribers who are known as *followers*. Senders can restrict delivery to those in their circle of friends or, by default, allow open access.

BRIEF GLOSSARY OF SOCIAL NETWORKING TERMS

Blogs are websites with dated items of content in reverse chronological order, self-published by bloggers. Items – sometimes called posts - may have keyword tags associated with them, are usually available as feeds, and often allow commenting.

Chat or Instant Messaging is an online conversation with another person. The tools allow you to indicate whether or not you are available for a chat, and if so can be a good alternative to emails for a rapid exchange. Facebook has a “chat” function.

Facebook Page is the term for someone’s profile page on Facebook.

Friends on social networking sites, are contacts whose profile you link to in your profile. On some sites people have to accept the link.

Groups are collections of individuals with some sense of unity through their activities, interests or values. They are bounded: you are in a group, or not. They differ in this from networks, which are dispersed, and defined by nodes and connections. Email lists and forums sit easily with bounded groups, blogs with networks - although the match with tools is not entirely clear-cut. A group may use a blog, and an email list may serve a network.

Myspace Page is the term for someone’s profile page on Myspace.

Post to post is to comment on someone’s profile page. In turn, the comment you made is a “post.”

Profiles are the information that you provide about yourself when signing up for a social networking site. As well as a picture and basic information, this may include your personal and business interests, a "blurb" about yourself, your interests. Often times, profiles will reveal a person’s geographical location, age, religion and relationship status.

Status Update is a space on a profile where the profile owner may write whatever they want, usually a person writes what he or she is currently doing.

Wall is the place where people who are your friends may post comments about you. This is helpful in investigations because you can read what other people have posted about the individual.

FACEBOOK AND MYSPACE

FACEBOOK

www.facebook.com

Facebook is the world's largest social network, with over 250 million users.

Facebook was founded by [Mark Zuckerberg](#) in February 2004, initially as an exclusive network for Harvard students. It was a huge hit: in 2 weeks, half of the schools in the Boston area began demanding a Facebook network. Zuckerberg immediately recruited his friends [Dustin Moskowitz](#) and Chris Hughes to help build Facebook, and within four months, Facebook added 30 more college networks.

Today, Facebook continues to change the way people communicate and stay in contact. It is an online forum for self expression, communication, hobbyists and, some might say, voyeurism.



MYSPACE

www.myspace.com

Although Myspace has lost the popularity contest to Facebook, Myspace continues to be a forum for younger people (mostly teens) to host their profiles and communicate with others. Myspace and Facebook are very similar.

OUR INVESTIGATION – HOW SOCIAL NETWORKS CAN HELP CRIMINAL DEFENSE INVESTIGATIONS

Facebook and Myspace can be great tools for investigation. They are online places where people write about themselves, what they are doing, where they are and what their interest are. Employers have been known to use these sites to research potential employees. Prosecutors and Law Enforcement may peruse these sites for violations of probation or general criminal activity. We should too. The following is a list of information that may be found on social networking sites that can be useful to a criminal defense investigation:

- current geographic location
- the last time a person logged in to the site
- status updates – what the person is doing right now (or was doing last night, week, month, etc)
- witness credibility
- relationship status
- who a person may know or be friends with
- employment
- hometown
- current town
- age
- religion
- general information about interests
- statements of the person (such as “I like to drink alcohol”)
- statements of the friends of a person (posts)
- physical description
- photographs – general or even incriminating
- contact (if one person is having prohibited contact with another)
- much more...

If you have questions about Facebook, Myspace, or social networking in general, feel free to contact me. The field is constantly evolving and it takes time to keep up, but I think we’ll find that if we know how to use these tools to our advantage, we will be able to stay one step ahead of prosecution and law enforcement.

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